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A COLLOQUY ON THE  
WRITING AND PRINTING  
REFORMATION

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# A COLLOQUY

ON THE

## WRITING AND PRINTING REFORMATION.

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## A COLLOQUY ON THE WRITING AND PRINTING REFORMATION.

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*He.*—So I perceive you write short hand.

*I.*—Yes; and yet no—an ambiguous answer, I must own, and yet I know not how I could frame a better.

*He.*—Explain, explain.

*I.*—Methodically; first the yes, and then the no. I do write a short hand, because, instead of those cumbrous and ill-imagined strokes which you employ for the expression of your ideas, I content myself with a few geometrically constructed forms, which are just as easy to read, and far more easy to write. How singular it is that people should have gone on so many years endeavouring to form letters rapidly which were never meant for rapidity! True, they have, in some measure, altered the original shapes, to suit the onward spirit of the age, and, in the performances of some persons, the letters are, indeed, degraded into most shapeless monsters—caricatures of strokes—mere dreams of letters, rather than letters themselves, which their very framers are soon unable to decipher, and all to gain expedition, which, after all, is not gained to any great extent; while one of the most important objects in writing—perspicuity—is irreparably lost. We have the old stone-cutters' figures yet, with only a few of the angles rounded off. We write from left to right, and all our letters are drawn downwards from right to left, so that our pen goes backwards every stroke it should go forwards. In short, such a heap of anomalies, absurdities, and perplexities as is presented by modern calligraphy could only have been invented in times when learning was meant to be the exclusive property of the few, and people who could write claimed the benefit of clergy, and escaped capital punishment. We live in better times, and, therefore, I hope we shall all write better and faster.

*He.*—I certainly recollect that it was an adage of my writing master that no one could write well and fast at the same time.

*I.*—That is simply owing to the complexity of the strokes employed.

*He.*—But, what would you substitute. The different systems of short hand which I have seen all labour under one great and apparently insurmountable defect; they

cannot be read with ease even after having been put by for a few days.

*I.*—This is, of course, due to their erroneous construction.

*He.*—Erroneous, indeed; for? of what use is manuscript which cannot be easily read. We speak, in general conversation, much faster than the most practised reporter ever wrote, and that *reading* what has been written should be more troublesome than *writing* it, is intolerable.

*I.*—And yet this is continually the case with the long-hand system which you seem to befriend, when written with any degree of rapidity.

*He.*—Nay, but our letters are perfectly legible, even when not quite accurately shaped; whereas, geometrical forms, such as short hand writers appear to use, are exceedingly difficult to form, with any thing approaching to accuracy.

*I.*—You are mistaken, if you think that it is at all more difficult to draw geometrical lines with sufficient accuracy to insure their legibility than your complex substitutes, with their store of superfluous parts. This is a point of practise, and the practise of all *English* short hand writers goes to prove that you are wrong. Not but what I recollect seeing the same objection urged in a German book on short hand; but I can assure you, from my own practise, that such is not the case. The geometrical forms are much simpler than any other, and are very readily struck by the hand, while the forms which words assume in consequence of the geometrical elements out of which they are constructed, is a great source of legibility, for the eye soon accustoms itself to read by the mere forms of words, and almost every word has, in a good system of short hand, its own peculiar form. But good systems of short hand are not in any abundance. I said just now that illegible systems were constructed on erroneous principles. It seems as if the inventors of short hand, believing that their systems could never become universal, and that manuscripts, to be legible, must exist in long hand, considered the question of legibility one of minor importance, and concentrated their efforts upon the production of a set of symbols by means of which they might be able to follow a speaker, trusting to

their memory to supply omissions, which are numerous enough; for, despite the multiplicity of arbitrary characters which they employ, no short hand, but the one you have seen me write, *has* effected the object of taking down speeches absolutely verbatim.

*He.*—Then you really *do* write a short hand. ? What did you mean by saying just now that what you write is *not* short hand.

*I.*—I was coming to that point. I said that the *only* principle on which former systems of stenography were constructed, was that of obtaining expedition. This system is, you perceive, called PHONOGRAPHY, or Writing by Sound. Here is the grand point of distinction. Its first object is to obtain an accurate symbolization of the sounds of language, and its second to contract these symbols for expeditious writing. The result of the labours of its inventor has been to form four kinds of writing, besides a system of printing, by which we hope to change the face of the literature of the world.

*He.*—Stay, stay; you are proceeding very fast. Your object may be very magnificent, but I should doubt its practicability.

*I.*—You are beginning early with your doubts; I have not as yet said a word about the principles upon which these systems are constructed further than that these alphabets are all phonetic. Five alphabets certainly appear a great number, but, in fact, there are only three alphabets differing from one another, the other two modes of writing being mere abbreviations of one of the others. We have, first, the printed alphabet, for I prefer starting with that, as being the fullest, and not admitting of many contractions; a few are, indeed, allowed, more for the purpose of facilitating spelling and reading than for any other object.

*He.*—? But you are really not serious in your ideas. ? You don't mean to think of changing our present style of printing.

*I.*—I do, indeed.

*He.*—Preposterous! chimerical!

*I.*—Hard words, hard words; and, permit me to add, rather inconsiderately uttered. I must digress a little to answer you. ? Have you never experienced any difficulty in spelling. ? Have you never written a word on a side slip of paper, to see *how it looked*, in order to judge whether it was correctly spelt. ? Have you never felt puzzled as to the correct pronunciation of a word. ? Do you, in short,

know how to pronounce every word of your own or any other language which employs Roman types, and with the sounds of which languages you are acquainted, directly you see it.

*He.*—Certainly not; I own to the deficiencies of which you accuse me.

*I.*—? Do you not think it very desirable that these deficiencies should cease to exist. ? That you should only have to learn *one* printed alphabet for *all* languages—that no peasant, even, should be obliged to “skip a hard word,” or to write a letter full of hideous false spelling; or, as often happens at present, even among those who are supposed to be better educated, to form his letters slovenly, in order to conceal his ignorance of orthography.

*He.*—Most desirable; but ? how would you effect it.

*I.*—By spelling by sound.

*He.*—Then adieu to all etymology.

*I.*—On the contrary; then will etymology be first generally understood.

*He.*—You delight to speak in paradoxes.

*I.*—They are of your own invention. This objection of etymology is always the first thrown in the teeth of those who would change our spelling; yet spelling *has* changed—nay, is still changing. Take up a book two or three hundred years old, and see if I am not right. And ? has etymology lost by the change. It would be a difficult question to answer. But let's consider this matter orderly. ? What do you mean by etymology, for the word has several meanings; and I doubt whether those who make the objection have rightly considered wherein its force consists. ? Do you mean the derivation of words from one another by grammatical inflexion. Then I have no hesitation in saying that etymology must *gain* by having the words written correctly, according to sound, for by this means *only* can the effective real inflexions be made known. But I believe the meaning attached to etymology most in your mind, when you made your objection just now, was the derivation of words in one language from those in another. If etymology stop here, it is a very unsatisfactory and useless study. I delight in etymology, and wish to see it properly appreciated and extended. I would have it point out the original ideas which were present to the minds of the inventors of the names of things. Words are not so much derived from one another as formed in accordance with a common rule. It is, indeed, interesting to watch the germination of an idea, and trace it in its

various modifications through different languages, expressed by different sounds, all, however, modifications of one original sound, in the same way as the ideas themselves are modifications of one primary idea. But such etymology cannot become generally known until a knowledge of the primitive sounds of language and their mutual relations is more diffused, and this diffusion would be effectually secured by an alphabet constructed upon phonetic principles.

*He.*—? But how, for instance, would you detect the relation between *celestial* and the Latin *celestis*, between *nature* and the Latin *natura*, if you spell them *seleschyal*, *nacher*, as they are pronounced.

*I.*—You don't spell them accurately, by the by, because you have not the means, but I comprehend you. I answer,—by comparing these words, *seleschyal*, *nacher*, with the Latin *celestis*, *natura*, you gain a knowledge of an important fact, namely, that *s* and *k*, *t* and *ch*, are, in certain cases, interchangeable letters; and by this you have made a greater advance in etymology than you could have done by a thousand instances of false spelling. You thus find that *chop*, or, as they call it in Yorkshire, *cope* (to exchange), *cheap* (a market), *chap-man* (a dealer), *shop* (a place for sale), German *kauf* (a purchase), Dutch *koop* (ditto), are different forms of the same original word, which may be traced through the word *cup* (a hollow vessel) to the Hebrew *kāf* (a hand, either from the hollowness of the palm, or the convexity of the fist), in the same way as the German *handeln* (to deal) is clearly derived from *hand*. Your much vaunted system of spelling, which is in defiance of sound, would never have helped you to this conclusion.

*He.*—I don't feel, by any means, satisfied yet. If you spell according to sound, you will leave out the *gh* in *nought*, and you lose its relation to the German *nicht*.

*I.*—You have left the *gh* out in *not*; and yet, I dare say, you would not scruple to connect it with *nicht*, and Anglo-Saxon *naht*, or *ne-aht*.

*He.*—But, if you change the termination *tion*, or *sion*, into *shun* or *zhun*, ? how will you compare the Latin words. Thus, *vizhun* is nothing like *visio*.

*I.*—You will only learn another phonetic fact, namely, that *zy* (for *visio* was, probably, pronounced *vizyo*) is interchangeable with *zh*. This letter *y* is a great disturber of sounds, as you would soon find.

*He.*—If you go on at that rate, I shall begin to believe the Frenchman, who said that "etymology was a science where the vowel went for nothing at all, and the consonant for next to nothing."

*I.*—Quite as wisely said as that we must not change the present system of spelling, because we should lose our *very*—*very* important etymologies. Now I really do think that, much as I admire etymology, and wish for a more general appreciation of it, this result would be very dearly purchased at the price of retaining our present orthography. But only consider the matter a little more deeply, and you will find that the present system of spelling—proceeding upon no recognized principle; sometimes preserving the spelling to the prejudice of the pronunciation, as *bought* from *bóht*; sometimes changing the spelling for the sake of the pronunciation, as *sheep*, from *sceaf*; sometimes half one, and half the other, as *you*, from *eow*; sometimes neither one nor the other, as *city*, from *civitas*—disguises *both* the sound and the etymology. Only imagine that we did spell phonetically, and that some one proposed the present system to supersede it, he would be scouted from one end of the kingdom to the other. But, in ultimate analysis, ? what does your objection concerning the laws of etymology amount to. ? Do you mean that we should *never* have spell by sound. In other words, ? do you vote alphabetical writing a nuisance. Or, ? do you think it sufficient that the most original language we know (Sanskrit, from which our own, among others, is ultimately derived), should have had a most excellent phonetic alphabet, of which writers seem not to know how to speak with sufficient praise, and that one phonetic alphabet having been constructed, no occasion existed for the construction of others. ? Or, that the same symbols should be used for derived words, without any alteration, in spite of the manifest and great alteration in the *sounds* of these derived words themselves when uttered. In short, ? would you have all Europe *write* Sanskrit, and *speak* their own dialects.

*He.*—No; that would, indeed, be absurd.

*I.*—Yet you come very near it; for you would have us write *Latin*, or *Greek*, or *Anglo-Saxon*, and speak *English*.

*He.*—By no means; you quite mistake me. I am no advocate for extreme measures. Let a little be altered, but let the general character be preserved. Sufficient

might be retained to preserve etymology, while enough might be changed to indicate pronunciation.

*I.*—One would think that the inventors of our present orthographical system reasoned thus; in fact, we know they did so to a certain extent. We find Dr. Johnson insisting upon having *k* after *c* at the end of words, because (thanks to his rule) “no English word terminates in *c*,” and inserting *u* in the termination *our*, because “derived from the French *eur*,” in which case *eur* would, upon his principle, appear the best, unless, indeed, *o* be used for the Latin origin (*or*), and *u* for the French *eur*. This is, indeed, a refinement for the million! Both these pieces of orthography are going out of fashion, and the present generation writes *physic*, *honor*, in spite of the doctor’s dictum. But, ? what is the effect of the rule you propose; or, in fact, ? *is it any rule at all*. ? Do you leave it to the arbitrary feeling of the writer at the moment. Surely not; for then your language would assume such a harlequin appearance, that it would be exceedingly difficult to read. In truth, it puzzles me not a little to discover *how* the present unphonetic system of spelling was conceived, and, still more, how it was established. Ridicule must, undoubtedly, have had the most to do with it. We laugh at a person who spells ill, without considering the gigantic effort of memory necessary for spelling well. Yet I will venture to affirm that there is not one Englishman, however well educated—not even a printer’s reader—who is always sure of the spelling of every word which he employs; so widely does the plan you propound (which seems to be that hitherto acted upon) fail of being a guide to pronunciation. As to etymology, ? how many persons, do you think, know, from the orthography, the etymology of any word. Those who know Latin and Greek may, indeed, know some of the modern words derived from these languages, but they would be quite at sea as regards the more important part of our tongue—the Anglo-Saxon portion, for example. I have no hesitation in saying, that the number of those who derive a knowledge of etymology from our present orthography *alone*, is very small indeed; and the information which even these few thus acquire is very inadequate. Etymology is a study which does not lie on the surface. As I said before, I would, by no means, discourage it; I would only save it from superficiality. But to return from our long digression.

This printing alphabet, of which I was speaking when the subject of etymology was started, is the first; next, we have a long-hand alphabet, in which the present funny forms of letters are preserved. This is for those who prefer slow writing, and cannot wean themselves from the belief that it is the best; also for legal documents and other matters requiring great correctness, and in which the mere saving of manual labour is no object.

*He.*—? So, then, you admit that short hand will not do for every thing.

*I.*—If we had only honest men, it might; but, as a slight alteration in some of the strokes might make a serious alteration in the sense, we have long hand, as a security against knaves. Then comes the *First Style* of Phonography, in which the short hand characters are employed, and every word written phonetically; foreign words should be always written in this manner, or in long hand, if the writer prefers it, and thinks it less liable to alteration or error. Next, the *Second Style*, in which certain abbreviations are employed: this is a good hand for business purposes, and for letter writing, and is the one you have seen me use. This style is legible after having been put by for any period, and can be written three or four times faster than common long hand; it is, consequently, of great importance to any one who writes much, and wishes to refer to his manuscripts. Lastly, we have a *Third Style*, which is so contracted that the most rapid public speaker can, by a practised hand, be followed verbatim. I own that the third style is *not* so legible as the second, that is, the writer is more likely to forget the meaning of some of his contractions (arbitrary symbols there are none); but the third style is constructed in such a manner, that, while the reporter is reading over his notes, he can convert them into the second style, in which state they will be fit for press as soon as we have phonetic compositors.

*He.*—? What hopes have you that you will succeed in introducing this system of writing and printing.

*I.*—Great hopes. The first edition of Mr. Isaac Pitman’s Manual of Phonography was published in 1837, and the seventh edition is now (October, 1844) in the press. Many thousand persons have been taught to write this Phonography, and take great delight in using it themselves, and inducing others to do the same. Last year upwards of 50,000 letters in short hand passed through the post;

this year the number must be increased, at least, five-fold. A Phonographic Corresponding Society was established in March, 1843, and at the present time numbers 748 members. Various local Phonographic Societies have also been formed; and the Phonetic Festivals of Manchester, Birmingham, and Nottingham, (to which we may add the late Phonographic Soirées of Edinburgh and Bristol,) serve to show the interest taken in the diffusion of Phonography in these districts. A new fount of phonotypes has been purchased by voluntary subscription, and specimens of phonotypy appear monthly in the *Phonotypic Journal*, which is now in its third year, and numbers 1500 subscribers. There are 14 gentlemen constantly employed as lecturers and teachers of Phonography, and every member of the Corresponding Society diffuses a knowledge of it to some extent. The public classes of the lecturers are attended by some hundreds of pupils, and they have private classes in families and schools in smaller numbers. A monthly report of their exertions is given in the *Phonotypic Journal*. These are encouragements.—Then our object itself is so good; it is to make reading and writing so *easy*, that what has hitherto occupied *years* may be accomplished in *weeks*, and thus people cease to regard reading and writing as education, but learn to look upon them as merely the *means* of education. Nay, more, the good we propose effecting is not confined to our own countrymen only. The English language has become, by the enterprise of the English people, a general medium of commercial communication amongst all nations; the stores of English poetry, literature, and science, are eagerly sought after by most Europeans; but the great obstacle in acquiring our language has hitherto been, the extraordinary perplexity of the orthographical system. Let our books be printed phonetically, and this will become easy. I do not exaggerate when I tell you that I have often been thankful for having been born an Englishman, merely because I acquired the pronunciation of the language without labour, and had I been a foreigner I should have felt the necessity of studying it with a degree of dogged plodding and hopelessness of ultimate success, which sometimes quite appals me to think of. A German friend of mine who had been studying the pronunciation of our language out of a thick octavo volume of some 700 pages, told me, very truly, that “*the rules of English*

*pronunciation were all exceptions.*” This speech is no exaggeration. And what a satire it is upon an alphabet that it should require 700 pages to explain its use! And ? is this enough. Let the student who is obliged to turn out every word in pronouncing dictionaries (things unknown in other languages) respond.

*He.*—But, granting your object is very desirable, (and this I may, perhaps, be inclined to admit) and practicable, (which is, perhaps, more doubtful; but I have lived to see so much that has been termed impracticable, a matter of every day occurrence—from lighting streets by gas to crossing the Atlantic by steam—that I will not commit myself by saying that anything in reason is impracticable,) yet it seems to me that you will render a vast quantity of property useless in the shape of founts of types, libraries of books, &c.

*I.*—Types wear out. I should, indeed, be happy if assured that the reformation would be established as soon as the present founts of types are worn out.—But the loss here would not be so great as you anticipate, for we only throw *one* type (c) completely out of use. Instead of rejecting their present types, printers would but have to provide themselves with additional ones. Books printed in the phonetic character will be supplied according to the demand of the new readers, and gradually supersede the old.—Those who wish to refer to *ancient books* (as those in the present types will be called), will find no difficulty in learning the meaning of the old symbols *by means of the new*, for phonetic printing will be of great assistance even in learning to read the present heterography, as we call it, for it is not orthography (or correct spelling) at all. Such of these books as are fitted for general perusal will, of course, be reprinted, as new editions are called for, in the new types; while some works will, for, perhaps, a 100 years or more, be still printed in the old style, as we find, at present, reprints of old books, with the spelling of the period when they were written. Another argument in favour of the change of spelling is thus furnished by the fact that we are used to it; three hundred years ago, our language, as I have said, had a very different appearance from what it now has, and we can only *guess* at the pronunciation and know that it was *not* the same as at present. But our phonotypes will be a record of the changes of pronunciation, and thus be of great interest and value

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